

Early career primary teachers' discursive negotiations of academisation

Kathryn Spicksley 

School of Education, University of Worcester, Worcester, UK

ABSTRACT

This article reports findings from a small-scale research project which explored the professional identities of early career teachers working in primary academies in England. During interviews and focus groups, these new teachers resisted identifying as 'academy teachers,' constructing academy status as an unimportant feature when deciding where to work. I theorise this phenomenon using Foucault, arguing that the willingness of new teachers to construct academy schools as 'no different' to their maintained counterparts is a key factor in the success of post-2010 academisation as a biopolitical project.

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Introduction

Academy schools are a type of independent state-funded school in England. As independent state-funded schools, academies are afforded autonomy over staffing, including the freedom to depart from national pay and conditions for teachers, and to hire unqualified teachers. The first academy schools opened under 'New' Labour in 2002, and by 2010 there were 203 academy schools open. In 2010, as a result of the 2010 Academies Act introduced by the incoming Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government, the number of academy schools increased dramatically. By January 2021, there were 9608 academy schools in England, accounting for 45 per cent of English state schools. Of these, 6310 primary schools were academies, or 38 per cent of state primary schools (DfE, 2021).

Academisation in England has had a significant impact on the school workforce. Multi-academy trusts (MATs), umbrella organisations responsible for the management of several academies, are changing the dynamics of staff movement between schools (Worth 2017). Academy status also increases the likelihood that a school will employ unqualified teachers (Cirin 2014; Martindale 2019). Such findings align with those of other countries with similar systems of independent state-funded schooling. In the US, for example, Charter Schools have been identified as having a significant impact on school labour markets, by replacing experienced teachers with new teachers (Henry Jr. & Dixon, 2016) and, once employed, retaining these new teachers within the Charter School system (Anderson and Nagel 2020).

CONTACT Kathryn Spicksley  k.spicksley@worc.ac.uk  School of Education, University of Worcester, Henwick Grove, Worcester, WR2 6AJ.

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Coinciding with the expansion of academisation post-2010 was the discursive foregrounding of a teacher recruitment and retention ‘crisis’ within both policy (House of Commons Education Committee (HOCEC) 2017; DfE 2019b) and the media (Adams 2019; Busby 2019), with an emphasis on early career teacher (ECT) attrition (Jolin 2019; DfE 2019b). Although primary teacher training targets were met within this period (HOCEC 2017, 6), a submission to a parliamentary inquiry on the recruitment and retention of teachers by James Noble-Rogers (of the Universities Council for the Education of Teachers) stated that ‘most primary head teachers [...] are struggling to recruit enough teachers’ (HOCEC 2017, 6). As a result of the national teacher shortage, ECTs in England experienced a greater degree of choice and less precariousness in their employment options than teachers who qualified elsewhere (Hulme and Menter 2014; Willis et al. 2017; Stacey et al. 2021).

This article extends the findings of previous research on academisation by specifically and purposefully attending to the discursive identity-positionings of ECTs working in primary academy schools, focusing on the rationales and justifications provided by ECTs for their employment decisions. I use Foucault’s theories of governmentality and biopolitics to theorise the systemic change which has occurred in English schooling pre- and post-2010, and in my search for the ‘logic of a great strategy’ (Foucault 1998, 97), I argue that the apparent indifference of ECTs to academisation indicates the successful deployment of a biopolitical apparatus intended to extend the reach and secure the normalisation of academy status within English schooling. My intention is not to criticise ECTs and their decisions, but to draw attention to a particular *dispositif* working on the subject of the primary ECT in the post-2010 period of academisation.

Academisation and early career teachers

Academisation in England: Discipline and biopolitics

The first academies opened in England in 2002, as part of a wide range of initiatives introduced under ‘New’ Labour, intended to create a ‘radical option to raise standards in areas of disadvantage’ (Department for Education and Skills (DfES) 2001, 44). These early academies were targeted at underperforming comprehensive schools.¹ Comprehensives which were considered to have an intransigent record of poor performance were ‘transformed’ (Beckett 2008, 22) into academies through a combination of removal from local authority control and support from the commercial sector (Ball 2007; Adonis 2012).

The early academies programme included financing the construction of expensive and innovative buildings for new academies (National Audit Office (NAO) 2007; Leo, Galloway, and Hearne 2010; Adonis 2012) which served to symbolise New Labour’s commitment to education (Ball 2007) and to distinguish academies from their predecessor schools and other maintained schools in the area (Adonis 2012). The distinctive pedagogical characteristics which developed within some academies – including curricula informed by entrepreneurial values (Woods, Woods, and Gunter 2007), strong religious ethos (Green 2012), and the rejection of progressive pedagogy and strict discipline (Kulz 2017a; 2017b; Duoblys 2017) – further served to distinguish academies from maintained schools (Hatcher and Jones 2006; Beckett 2007). The discursive and financial effort expended on distinguishing early academies from comprehensive schools heavily relied on a concomitant discursive construction of comprehensives as ‘unruly places’ (Reay 2007, 1191), and both the

architectural design and pedagogical ethos of some of the early academies were primarily intended to discipline students and teaching staff (Page 2017; Kulz 2017b).

During the New Labour period, therefore, the dominant form of power working through academisation was disciplinary, with attention focused on individual schools considered in need of intervention. All schools during this period (as currently) were subjected to techniques of observation and measurement in order to bring about 'a correction, a therapy, a normalization' (Foucault 1998, 227). Ofsted, the inspection body which reports on schools in England, would identify individual schools which required support, and academisation was one intervention amongst a portfolio of measures targeted towards 'failing' schools (Sammons 2008). Early academisation was therefore indicative of the disciplinary regime of power which worked upon schools during this political period (Perryman 2007), with the process of academisation acting as the final disciplinary technology imposed upon schools which failed to meet normative standards. In such a regime, it was the *difference* between academy schools and comprehensives which had disciplinary effects. Those opposed to academisation within the teaching community feared changes to their school's character (Hatcher and Jones 2006; Hatcher 2009) and a reduction in pay and working conditions (National Union of Teachers (NUT) 2007) as a result of academisation.

In contrast, the aim of Conservative education policy from 2010 to the present has been to 'move towards a system where every school is an academy' (DfE, 2016, 51). The Academies Act (2010) extended academy status to high-performing schools, and enabled primary and special schools to become academies for the first time.² Academisation would remain an intervention targeted at schools deemed to be 'underperforming'; schools which were forced to become academies in this way would be partnered with more successful schools and were called 'sponsored academies.' However, becoming a 'converter academy' was now an option for high-performing schools which had achieved an 'Outstanding' or 'Good' rating during their most recent Ofsted inspection.³

Clear differences between sponsored and converter academies quickly became apparent, both in terms of intake and attainment (Gorard 2014). However, post-2010 political rhetoric on academies in England consistently placed an emphasis on the autonomy enjoyed by academy schools (in contrast to maintained schools), rather than foregrounding differences within the academy sector (Gove 2010; Gove 2012; Morgan 2016). In such discourse, the English school system was constructed as being 'in crisis', providing 'the rationale and legitimisation for radical policy intervention as exemplified by the academies programme' (Francis 2015, 437). The discursive tendency by politicians to homogenise different types of academies and to position academisation as the primary route to system improvement obfuscates the fragmented landscape of schooling in England; Courtney's (2015) mapping of school types in England found 11 different legal categories of school.

There has therefore been a significant change in the technologies of power deployed post-2010 regarding academisation. Post-2010, education policy was oriented towards an effort to restructure the entire population of schools, a restructure which was explicitly justified as 'allow[ing] every child the chance to take their full and equal share in citizenship, shaping their own destiny' (DfE 2010, 6), but that also indirectly supported Conservative commitments to austerity (Taylor-Gooby 2012; Granoulhac 2017). This focus on the management of the entire school population in order to meet clear teleological ends is evidence of a shift towards 'biopower', in which the target of intervention is the population as a whole:

After a first seizure of power over the body in an individualizing mode, we have a second seizure of power that is not individualizing but, if you like, massifying, that is directed not at man-as-body but at man-as-species (Foucault 2004, 242)

The aim of such technologies was the ‘calculated management of life’ (Foucault 1998, 139). The distinct nature of a biopolitical apparatus lies in its focus on ‘strategies for the governing of life’ (Rabinow and Rose 2006, 195), which specifically target the subject, employing mechanisms to alter the behaviour and beliefs of individuals. The aim of these mechanisms is to guide the subject’s behaviour towards ways of being or behaving which are supportive of the ‘life or health of the population’ (Rabinow and Rose 2006, 197). With academy status positioned by politicians as important for the academic health of the nation, strategies of power targeted teacher subjects, with the aim of reducing opposition to academisation. The technology of power evident in post-2010 academisation ‘does not exclude disciplinary technology, but it does dovetail into it, integrate it, modify it to some extent’ (Foucault 2004, 242). Although disciplinary technologies of power played a key role in post-2010 academisation, the overall aim of policy was different – to alter the school system as a whole, rather than to improve individual schools.

The shift in power which occurred following the formation of the Coalition government with regards to education necessarily involved a shift in the governmentality - the ‘conduct of conduct’ (Dean 2010, 17) - deployed to shape the decisions and beliefs of teachers in England. The particular combination of incentives and sanctions deployed as part of the post-2010 academisation programme encouraged those previously opposed to academisation to convert (Keddie 2016; Greany and Higham 2018), having a significant effect on the identities of school leaders. Whereas some school leaders were able to position themselves as increasingly influential (Coldron et al. 2014; Kulz 2017a), others were compelled to become ever more compliant with external requirements (Thompson, Lingard, and Ball 2020). Research has also indicated the discursive justifications made by school leaders for conversion to academy status, including efforts to retain autonomy (Keddie 2016; Thompson, Lingard, and Ball 2020) and to maintain financial stability (Bassett et al. 2012). However, there has been relatively limited attention paid to how those new to the profession construct academisation.

Early career teachers and academy schools

Past literature on academisation in England reveals a relationship between academies and the employment of inexperienced teachers, including young staff (Keddie 2019; Kulz 2017b; Duoblys 2017), those on fast-track training routes into teaching such as Teach First (O’Hear 2008; Adonis 2012), and unqualified teachers (Martindale 2019). The term early career teacher (ECT), used in this article, is taken from literature on teacher identity and career stage (e.g., Day et al. 2007; Kington, Reed, and Sammons 2014).⁴

Some of the first academies to open were criticised by Ofsted for their high turnover of inexperienced staff (Ofsted 2005; 2006), suggesting perhaps that more experienced teachers preferred to seek more regulated employment within the maintained sector. Hiring inexperienced teachers was justified by Philip O’Hear, Head of Capital City Academy, as a pragmatic response to recruitment difficulties (O’Hear 2008). In contrast, Andrew Adonis, the ‘architect’ of New Labour’s academy programme, claimed an alignment of purpose

between academies and Teach First, a recruitment initiative intended to attract high-quality graduates into teaching:

There is a close parallel between Teach First and academies. Both are focused on reinventing the comprehensive. Teach First seeks radically to improve their staffing; academies reinvent their governance and leadership. These are two sides of the same coin (Adonis 2012, 42).

Whether for pragmatic or philosophical reasons, academy schools were – from their outset – frequently associated with the practice of employing young, inexperienced teachers, and the hiring of these teachers allowed these schools to function when more experienced teachers were unobtainable.

ECTs continued to be associated with academy schools within critical literature on academisation post-2010 (Duoblys 2017; Kulz 2017b; Salokangas and Ainscow 2018), however, such literature is primarily focused on the managerial rationale for hiring inexperienced teachers. The employment of young teachers enables academy schools to position themselves as a prestigious offer within the local education marketplace (Kulz 2017b) particularly if they have qualified through a fast-track, alternative certification route (Fitzgerald et al. 2018). Employment of inexperienced teachers can also assist in generating a sense of collective identity within schools (Keddie 2019), ensuring that staff are ‘on the bus’ with the demands of school management (Goodson 2014; Courtney and Gunter 2015). Furthermore, new teachers in academy schools are typically described as dedicated and hard-working (Keddie 2019; Salokangas and Ainscow 2018), having fewer family commitments than older staff, and therefore more able to dedicate themselves to the job of teaching (Duoblys 2017). New teachers are less expensive than older teachers, enabling management to cut costs in an increasingly precarious, austerity-driven financial environment (Spicksley 2018; Thompson, Lingard, and Ball 2020). The DfE (2019a) notes how classroom teachers are, on average, paid less in academies than in maintained schools, and suggests that this discrepancy reflects a higher proportion of older teachers working within the maintained sector.

Literature on charter schools in America provides a further insight into why ECTs may choose to work in academies. Some of the Teach for America Corps⁵ studied by Lefebvre and Thomas (2017, 362) described their charter placements as ‘like-minded schools’. Weiner and Torres’s (2016, 75) study, which sampled 19 novice teachers working in charter schools, identified that these teachers chose to work in charters because they identified as highly skilled and dedicated to their job, and felt that charter schools provided an institutional fit for this identity; these teachers constructed traditional public schools as ‘lacking cache and rigour’. In these studies, the professional identities of ECTs were constructed around a discursive effort to distance themselves from traditional public schools considered to lack prestige. These charter school ECTs built a professional identity which positioned the traditional public school teacher as abject, a pattern which has also been identified in the way that teachers employed in the private education sector in England construct state school teachers (Connolly and Hughes-Stanton 2020). However, in Australia – where the education system is also undergoing similar neoliberal marketisation – ECTs appear to identify more strongly with their individual school than their school type. One consequence of such identification is the attribution of difficulties or challenges during the ECT phase to teacher personality and school fit, rather than to systemic problems (Stacey 2019).

The employment of inexperienced teachers can facilitate system reform (Henry Jr. & Dixon, 2016; Thompson, Lingard, and Ball 2020; Spicksley, 2021) and restrict pupil access to qualified teachers in low-income areas (Lefebvre and Thomas 2017; Martindale 2019), perpetuating cycles of underachievement. By working in academy schools, ECTs support the post-2010 biopolitical aim to extend academisation throughout the school population. It is therefore important to better understand how ECTs identify with their status as ‘academy teachers’.

Methodology

The data discussed in this article was drawn from a larger project which explored the professional identities of ECTs working in primary Multi-Academy Trusts. In total, 12 interviews and four focus groups were conducted with ECTs. The research questions pertinent to the data and analysis presented in this paper were:

RQ1: How do primary ECTs discursively construct academisation and academy schools?

RQ2: How do primary ECTs position their professional identities as academy teachers?

The research was specifically focused on *primary* academy schools, the majority of which are converter academies ($n = 4466$) or free schools ($n = 221$) whose governing bodies have chosen to take on academy status. Free schools are new schools which opened after 2010, which have the same legal status as academy schools, but as new schools had no need to ‘convert’. The number of sponsored academies, which have been forced to become academies, is significantly smaller in the primary sector ($n = 1623$) (DfE, 2021).

Sample

I recruited two contrasting MATs to participate in a comparative case study (Stake 2005, Yin 2009), enabling an exploration of differences and similarities both between and within primary MATs (Table 1). Four primary academy schools participated in the project, across the two MATs. Although the MATs had a number of contrasting characteristics, none of the academy schools were ‘sponsored academies.’ This sampling strategy ensured a specific focus on the identities of teachers within the type of academies which only existed following the 2010 Academies Act – primary converter academies and free schools.

In total, 12 ECTs participated in the research project; 11 had qualified either in England or abroad, and one was working as an unqualified teacher. The voices of seven of these ECTs are shared within the present article (Table 2), all of whom were qualified teachers and were therefore eligible to teach in both academy and maintained schools.

Table 1. Contextual information about sampled MATs.

	Dahlia MAT	Rosemary MAT
Size	>25 schools in MAT	<5 schools in MAT
Geographical dispersion	National	Local
Phase coverage	Primary academies only	Primary and secondary academies
Date established	2012	2007
Sampled schools	Dill Academy (Converter; Good) Tarragon Academy (Free School; Requires Improvement)	Carnation Academy (Converter; Good) Daffodil Academy (Converter; Outstanding)

Table 2. Information about ECTs referred to in paper.

Professional Characteristics				Data Collection	
Pseudonym	School and MAT	Training route	Experience	Interview?	Focus Group?
Isabella	Tarragon (Rosemary MAT)	BEd Primary Education	NQT ⁸	Y	Y
Julia	Dill (Rosemary MAT)	BEd Primary Education	NQT	Y	N
Simon	Dill (Rosemary MAT)	School Direct ⁹	NQT	Y	Y
Zoe	Carnation (Dahlia MAT)	PGCE ¹⁰	NQT	Y	Y
Grace	Carnation (Dahlia MAT)	Qualified abroad (automatic QTS ¹¹ in the UK)	4 years	Y	Y
Abigail	Daffodil (Dahlia MAT)	PGCE	5 years	Y	N
Amelia	Daffodil (Dahlia MAT)	PGCE	4 years	Y	Y

The study was approved by the University of Worcester's Arts, Humanities and Education Research Ethics Panel.⁶ All participants provided informed, written consent. In accordance with ethical guidelines (British Educational Research Association 2018) the names of all participants, schools and MATs in this article are pseudonyms.

Data collection and analysis

ECTs were invited to participate in one, individual walking interview lasting between 30 and 60 minutes, and one focus group with other ECTs working in the same academy school, again lasting between 30 minutes and an hour. During walking interviews, the ECT participant led me on a tour of their academy school. Such mobile methodologies challenge the 'conventional distance between researchers and participants' (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2017, 56), helping to quickly build rapport with research participants (Carpiano 2009). Each walking interview ended in the participant's classroom, providing the opportunity to discuss sensitive issues in private. The focus group involved a ranking activity (Kitzinger 1995), in which teachers were asked to rank certain features of teachers according to importance, which was intended to facilitate discussion.

Transcripts were analysed using Fairclough's (1992) framework for Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), a decision made because Fairclough is heavily informed by Foucault. This encouraged a consistency between the way in which data was analysed initially, and later interpreted within a wider Foucauldian framework. Interviews were transcribed using a simplified version of the Jefferson Transcription System (Appendix), which helped to make visible the force of participants' utterances.

Findings

In their efforts to discursively construct a positive professional identity for themselves, ECTs who participated in this study resisted identifying as 'academy teachers', who had actively and specifically chosen to work within the academy sector. ECTs emphasised their flexibility, constructed similarities between academies and maintained schools, and foregrounded their professional values.

Flexibility and pragmatism

Isabella rejected the suggestion that working in a particular school or academy might be an important consideration when applying for a job:

- Researcher: We talked a bit about why this ↓school but it doesn't seem like that was a (.)
- Isabella: No (.) it's just a school, yeah
- Researcher: Or this Trust, ↑really? [Or again
- Isabella: [No, that was one of the questions on the interview and I had to completely (.) £blag it but honestly I hate (.) well in interviews I hate the question 'why do you want to work for us' or 'why did you apply for this job' £ha because I need £money? Because I did a £teaching degree and it's a teaching post?

Isabella (Walking interview)

Isabella emphasised her stance through the use of social laughter and rhetorical questions, and using particular lexical choices such as the honesty marker 'honestly' and the adverbial intensifier 'completely'.

Julia also resisted being positioned as an 'academy teacher':

- Julia: I work in an academy because (.) that's how (.) my path has gone (.) not because I've chosen it.
- Researcher: You didn't choose it because you thought 'If I work there (.) [that'll] be great for my career' =
- Julia: [no]

Dill Academy, Rosemary MAT (Focus Group)

Julia positioned herself as a teacher who accidentally happened to get a job at an academy. The use of the phrase 'my path has gone' metaphorically constructed Julia's career trajectory as a journey, and as such had the effect of diminishing Julia's responsibility for her employment choices. When asked directly whether she had chosen to work at an academy because it could support her career, Julia quickly answered with the short and direct negative response 'no', indicating the clarity of her stance and the force of her resistance.

Julia and Isabella appeared to claim social value for themselves as teachers by emphasising their pragmatism and flexibility with regards to employment, rather than by identifying as 'academy teachers'.

Personal experience of the maintained sector

Other ECTs referred to personal experiences of working in both academy and maintained settings in order to construct academy schools as indistinguishable from local authority maintained schools. For example, Simon compared his current academy with a previous teacher training placement in a maintained school:

- Simon: I've worked in an academy and placement was in a non-academy and there's not (.)
- Researcher: No difference?
- Simon: Barely anything different. I think the politics are [...]
- I fff I think it's more for the higher higher in the hierarchy when it comes to academy and government based sch- I don't ↓know.
- Researcher: Ok
- Simon: I'd say it's not very important at all

Simon (Walking interview)

Simon distanced himself from the issue of academisation, arguing that the distinction between academy and maintained schools was not an issue for ECTs, but for those who were 'higher in the hierarchy'. Simon constructed the minimal difference between academy schools and local authority schools not as an opinion, but as a fact to which his lived experience was testament.

Zoe used a similar strategy to Simon:

- Zoe: Work in an academy.
 Grace: Mmm
 Zoe: I'd say it doesn't matter, does it? (.) [Depends on the school.
 Grace: [I don't think it does either I think
 Zoe: I've been to academies that are completely different
 Grace: Mmhm
 Zoe: And I've been to ↑schools that are completely different I don't think it really
 ↑means much anymore

Carnation School, Dahlia MAT (Focus Group)

Like Simon, Zoe offered biographical information to deliberately self-position herself as having a particular expertise on the matter, giving her statements additional credibility. Grace's contribution was initiated by Zoe, who assumed interactional control, and the two participants then worked to construct a shared knowledge that academy status was unimportant.

At Daffodil School, Abigail also backgrounded academy status in her discourse:

- Abigail: there was no like 'we do this in the Dahlia Trust', it's all very Daffodil we do it in Daffodil not in the Trust, Trust whatever.
 Researcher: Mmm
 Abigail: Yeah, so no, I don't think brand Dahlia is very strong in this school at all.
 Researcher: Mmm (.) and
 Abigail: So, that's why, so really it's not any different from any other school (.) really
 Researcher: Mmm
 Abigail: Apart from the only reason it's different (.) well, yeah it's more (.) they wanna maintain their excellent results so there's a lot of pressure, but then I've also worked in another school 'hh another outsta::nding school in a very poor area < again that was outstanding that had a pressure to stay outstanding, and I think sometimes that's worse working in an outstanding school because you need to ↑stay outstanding.

Abigail (Walking interview)

Abigail constructed the institutional culture of Daffodil School as being primarily focused on the maintenance of results, with the affective experience of working at Daffodil School – the 'pressure' – as being a result of this performative school culture, rather than academisation. Abigail introduced the topic of Ofsted ratings to tacitly position herself as a high-quality teacher, taking interactional control by shifting the topic of the research conversation away from academy status. Abigail repeated the Ofsted category 'outstanding' five times in this short extract, foregrounding the topic of Ofsted and backgrounding academy status.

Abigail, Zoe and Simon all drew on their professional experience to construct academisation as an insignificant issue for ECTs. In doing so, their discursive constructions suggested that they did not consider working in an academy to afford them any particular status. Abigail's interview suggests that other factors, such as a school's Ofsted rankings, were considered to have more of an impact on a school's prestige or social standing.

Professional values and motivations

Teachers highlighted their motives for teaching, or affective responses to their schools, when engaged in research conversations about their employment decisions. Isabella positioned herself as a committed teacher who was dedicated to improving children's lives and education and, as a result, not having a preference as to which school she worked in:

Like, it wasn't anything it's just for me it was about you know working in a school, you've ↑got kids (.) I want to teach kids, that's why. I'm here like t- to make a difference t- to kids it doesn't matter (.) To me really which school they come from as long as I'm you know making a difference to children [...] Yeah so it wasn't about the Trust or the school

Isabella (Walking interview)

For Isabella, presenting a positive identity as a teacher involved foregrounding intrinsic and personal motivations for teaching, and backgrounding her choices concerning school type. Isabella repeated the phrase 'making a difference' and employed the discourse marker 'you know' in an attempt to construct shared knowledge concerning the nature of teaching. These linguistic choices helped Isabella to construct teaching as a vocation, presenting a professional identity which was more concerned with and committed to her students than concerned with her own progression or the status of her employer.

Grace claimed a match between her pedagogical approach and that of her academy school:

it seemed like a really good fit, I lo::ved just the who::le philosophy of Carna:tion I loved what it stood for I ↓thought during my interview and my trial day that Carnation felt more like an alternative ↑school

Grace (Walking interview)

Grace used verbal emphasis, including lengthening the words 'loved' and 'whole', to indicate her positive stance towards the values and curriculum at Carnation School. She constructed Carnation as feeling 'more like an alternative school', tacitly positioning herself as a teacher committed to more informal and creative pedagogical approaches.

Zoe, who also worked at Carnation, equally emphasised how her pedagogical values had influenced her decision to teach at Carnation:

So I was really fascinated by [Carnation] but I was going looking round most schools, I even went to look round another school, and it was for a Reception role, and they do sit down lessons three times a ↓day [...] And, just when you'd walk into a class and there's like four year olds (.) just, I was like ↑'Awww!' I dunno, I just couldn't, I didn't like it and I walked into this school and everyone's like, it's crazy but everyone seems to be having fun as well just (.) yeah it kind of that's why I was like yeah I'd like an interview here but the other places I was like °no:: I don't want one £ha°

Zoe (Walking interview)

By comparing Carnation's approach to that of another school, Zoe constructed a division between formal and informal approaches to education, and self-positioned as an informal teacher. Like Grace, it was the educational values at Carnation that Zoe constructed herself as identifying with, rather than its academy status.

The capacity of Carnation to depart from the National Curriculum was made possible as a direct result of being an academy. However, neither Grace nor Zoe linked Carnation's status as an academy to its alternative pedagogy and curriculum. In the focus group at Carnation, I explicitly raised this issue:

- Researcher: And how about here, do you feel that you get that 'cause here is an academy in a MAT so do you feel you get flexibility ↑here that you wouldn't (.) it's quite a different school to a lot of schools
- Zoe: Mmm
- Grace: Mmhm
- Zoe: Maybe with how we ↑teach? The curriculum.
- Grace: Yeah I would agree with that I think we are flexible with (.) the way in which we present the ↑curriculum and the way that we teach it, and so I think that's why we've both probably said that most important is to be creative and imaginative because our school does put a lot of [emphasis on that
- Zoe: [Yeah that's really good as well.
- Grace: Yes. Which is nice and you can come up with original ↑ideas um but I don't know like any of those perks in terms of days off in lieu or flexible (.) working hours that's not something that [I've encountered here]
- Zoe: [No. No erm] But yeah every, every academy's just so different though=
- Grace: = [Hmhm, it is.
- Zoe: [It's hard to (.) I think there's pros and cons to probably every way an [academy approaches it
- Grace: [Exactly. Yes

Carnation School, Dahlia MAT (Focus group)

Although both Zoe and Grace agreed that Carnation's curriculum is alternative, they avoided associating this alternative curriculum with academy status. Zoe stated that 'every academy's just so different' and Grace argued that Carnation did not offer the perks that other academies offer, such as 'time off in lieu or flexible working'. In this way, both Zoe and Grace distanced themselves from being constructed as teachers who have chosen to work at an academy specifically because of the advantages that working in an academy brings. Both Zoe and Grace worked to construct a match between their values and those of their school, but resisted attributing these values to academy status.

Amelia, who worked at Daffodil School, described it as 'quite formal', and said that she was attracted to the sense of calm at the school:

I think it was just as you walked round you could just see that the kids are °doing what they are supposed to be doing°. They all just looked like they liked being here [...] You can feel, you can feel an atmosphere I remember being taken round one when was on my placement and it was just you felt the chaos, everywhere you went you could feel it

Amelia (Walking interview)

Like Zoe, Amelia constructed a distinction between two schools when justifying her decision to work at Daffodil, but the status of Daffodil as an academy was not introduced as a significant factor. Instead, Amelia spoke about her professional values – she liked that the students were ‘doing what they were supposed to be doing’. Amelia went on to emphasise her affective response to her placement school, saying that ‘you just felt the chaos’. In doing so, Amelia identified as a teacher who liked formality and structure (although her drop in volume could indicate she believed this was not a socially acceptable position, as she made efforts not to be overheard). She found Carnation to suit her professional values when other schools did not, but did not construct this as a result of academy status.

Although Amelia differed from Zoe and Grace in her professional values, she aligned with their constructions of what was important when choosing a school to work in. These ECTs did not identify as academy teachers, but instead as teachers with strong professional values and motivations who happened to find that academy schools offered them the environment in which they wanted to teach. Academy status *per se* was not constructed as important.

Discussion

At the beginning of this paper, I theorised the difference between the pre-2010 academies programme under New Labour, and post-2010 Conservative-led academisation, as constituting a shift in the technologies of power working on schools in England. Whereas under New Labour academisation was primarily a disciplinary technology, working on individual schools which were considered to be failing, post-2010 academisation most closely maps on to a type of biopolitics, in which attention is turned to the ‘global mass’ (Foucault 2004, 242) of schools in England. In this discussion, I show how the governmentality working on the conduct of ECTs contributes towards the post-2010 biopolitical ambition to ‘[d]ramatically extend the Academies programme, opening it up to all schools’ (DfE 2010, 12).

By backgrounding the significance of academisation, ECTs who participated in the present research project contributed to the normalisation of academy status within the primary academy sector. The silence of the participating ECTs on the significance of academy status and academisation was a key finding of this research project, indicating that academy status is becoming normalised amongst new entrants to the teaching profession. Whereas Charter Schools in America have managed to maintain a social position as more prestigious places to work than public schools (Weiner & Torres, 2016; Lefebvre and Thomas 2017), this does not appear to have been achieved by primary academy schools.

The ‘silence’ concerning academy status should not be considered insignificant, but instead as ‘an element that functions alongside the things said’ (Foucault 1998, 27). The silence of ECTs regarding academy status suggests that the post-2010 policy aim to normalise academy status was highly effective, at least in primary converter academies. In normalising academy schools, ECTs indirectly normalise the unique ‘freedoms’ that academy schools have as independent state-funded schools. Most notably, in terms of teachers’ working lives and careers, academy schools are able to divert from nationally agreed terms and conditions for teachers. The concerns of primary senior leaders about the effects of academisation on teacher autonomy and working conditions have been attended to in previous studies (Keddie 2016; Greany and Higham 2018); the present study appears to indicate that such concerns are not mirrored by primary ECTs.

Key to understanding the normalisation of academisation identified within the discourse of ECTs is Foucault's claim that disciplinary power, when most efficiently exercised, works with what feels natural to the person being disciplined:

The body, required to be docile in its minutest operations, opposes and shows the conditions of functioning proper to an organism. Disciplinary power has as its correlative an individuality that is not only analytical and 'cellular', but also natural and 'organic'. (Foucault 1977, p. 156)

Tasks which make people feel as though they are working against the natural impulses of their body, which feel restrictive or unnatural, constantly bring awareness to the person under discipline that they are being required to function in a way which differs from how they would autonomously choose to behave. Such requirements lead to the disciplined feeling oppressed, engendering resistance. Opportunities for resistance are therefore minimised when the person is being required to function in a way which feels natural and organic, when the disciplinary technology works with the natural movements of the body. Such discipline is intended to obtain 'maximum speed and maximum efficiency' (Foucault 1977, 154). The 'strategies of power' (Foucault 1998, 73) which are most effective are those which are productive, rather than repressive, and in order to be at their most productive, these strategies must work *with*, rather than against, those they are intending to discipline.

The ethos of these academy schools aligned with the values of the ECTs who worked within them, and this alignment in values encouraged ECTs to apply and commit to working at the school (Kirabo Jackson 2013; Skaalvik and Skaalvik 2011; 2017). In this way, the subtle conversion of maintained schools to academies is more acceptable and efficient than creating a grand distinction between academies and maintained schools, of the type that was common pre-2010. The apparent similarity between academy and maintained schools, the blurred distinction between the two, turned the attention of ECTs towards differences between individual schools, rather than differences between academy schools and maintained schools. ECTs like Zoe, Grace and Amelia constructed themselves as keen to find a school which mirrored their own pedagogies and values; in doing so, they backgrounded academy status and foregrounded differences between individual schools. As the data from the present research study illustrates, academy schools are discursively constructed by ECTs as just another 'type' of school, within an increasingly fragmented education system (Greany 2015) which ECTs are required to navigate. The present research project therefore supports the findings of Stacey (2019, 413), who found that ECTs came to believe that 'some teachers were better suited to particular schools than others'. Within a marketized system where each school works to stress their unique features, ECTs undertake significant identity work to align their beliefs and behaviours with that of their employing school. But such emphasis on the specificity of individual schools simultaneously obfuscates and normalises systemic problems, which exist beyond the level of individual schools.

Academisation post-2010 has therefore not only been a process of expansion, but a process of normalisation. The ECTs in this research study discursively minimized the differences between academy schools and maintained schools. However, post-2010 academisation has involved a significant structural change to the education system in England (Hargreaves 2011; Wilkins 2017; Rayner, Courtney, and Gunter 2018; Ehren and Perryman 2018; West and Wolfe 2019), inviting the participation of more private actors in the governance and management of public services, and altering teachers' negotiated terms and

conditions. Maintained schools follow national pay and conditions because they are obliged to; academy trusts follow national pay and conditions if they *choose* to. It is important to note that this distinction was never raised by ECTs in this study.

By backgrounding the significant differences between academy and maintained schools, ECTs indirectly facilitate the process of academisation. As academy schools feel, naturally, like ‘normal’ schools to ECTs, they show little resistance to academy status, either in principle or practice. Acceptance and normalisation of academy status by new entrants to the teaching profession may look like indifference, but this indifference provides crucial support for the policy of academisation. What feels natural for ECTs is actually an important element in the effective workings of a biopolitical apparatus, the ultimate objective of which is to increase private sector control of public assets and implement stringent austerity measures across public services (Granoulhac 2017).

ECTs have indirectly supported the functioning of academy schools since the first academies were opened under Labour (O’Hear 2008; Adonis 2012). Difficulties recruiting and retaining staff meant many of the early academies employed high numbers of inexperienced teachers or unqualified trainees, while also experiencing a high turnover of staff; the success of the early academies therefore rested on ECTs being willing to work in academy schools. There are indications that such employment patterns exist within academies post-2010 (Kulz 2017b; Salokangas and Ainscow 2018; Martindale 2019), and the willingness of ECTs to work in academy schools is a key factor in this relationship. By constructing academies as no different from maintained schools, ECTs in this study discursively justified their choice to work in an academy school by identifying with the act of teaching and the specific environment of their school, rather than as academy teachers, committed to the principles and values of academisation.

When asked about how they came to work in academies, a number of ECT participants within the study used their response as an opportunity to ‘transform themselves’ (Foucault 1988, 18) into ‘good’ teachers. Isabella emphasised her desire to work anywhere where she could have a positive impact on children; Amelia implied that the sense of calm in the school matched her calm and organised teaching style; Grace and Zoe spoke about how their school’s creative approach to the curriculum aligned with their imaginative and creative approach as teachers. In this way, discursively navigating the policy of academisation becomes a way in which teachers are able to ‘work on themselves’ (Perryman et al. 2017, 745), providing an opportunity for ECTs to position themselves as having desirable characteristics, such as Isabella’s commitment to teaching or Zoe and Grace’s creativity. As such, working in an academy, although constructed as unimportant, provided an opportunity for these teachers to construct a positive professional identity as a teacher, deploying an element of pleasure. This use of pleasure to facilitate the workings of power is indicative of the biopolitical nature of the apparatus of power deployed post-2010, and a reminder that power is not only inseparable from knowledge, but also from pleasure (Dean 2012). ECTs who participated in this study not only normalised academisation, but used their schools’ status as an academy to discursively position themselves as particularly capable, creative, or dedicated teachers. In a discursive environment in which ECTs have often been positioned as struggling (Veenman 1984; Huberman 1993; Caspersen and Raaen 2014; Schuck et al. 2017; DfE, 2019), these ECTs used their employment in primary academies as a way to position themselves as committed, principled, and reflective, portraying positive professional identities for themselves. Such discursive positionings indicate a ‘political ordering of life [...] through an affirmation of self’ (Foucault 1998, 123).

By refusing to engage with the principles underlying academisation, and by constructing academies as the same as other schools, the professional identities of ECTs indirectly facilitate the continued policy of academisation. This is not because ECTs are, on the whole, overwhelmingly positive about academisation or are particularly committed or dedicated to working in academy schools, but because working in an academy school feels natural and normal – almost, to use Foucault's term, 'organic' (Foucault 1977, 156), and offers a way for these teachers to emphasise that they embody privileged values or characteristics. Academisation, for new entrants to the profession, is something that is worked with, rather than against. In their discursive navigations of academy status and its impact, the ECTs in this study showed how power 'comes from below' (Foucault 1988, 94). Although generally backgrounded in previous literature on academisation in favour of a focus on school and system leaders considered influential within local and national school markets, the everyday discursive actions of ECTs contribute to investing academy schools with credibility and legitimacy, and are therefore worthy of attention.

The present research study suggests that for ECTs, the type of school they work in is constructed as unimportant; ECTs do not identify as 'better' or 'more effective' teachers because they work in an academy school. ECTs identify as teachers, who *happen* to work in an academy school. This identity positioning is significant, as ECTs' willingness to work at academies plays a key role in the continued expansion of the Academies programme. ECTs' positioning of academy schools as 'no different' from maintained schools distorts the very real differences between the two forms of employment, not least the fact that teachers in academy schools are, on average, paid less than those in the maintained sector (DfE, 2019). This 'silence itself – the things one declines to say, or is forbidden to name' (Foucault 1998, 27) enables further academisation, and through it further privatisation of the school system in England, and a reduction in teacher's rights and negotiated conditions of employment. The identification of ECTs with the act of teaching, rather than the status of their school as academies, therefore supports rather than prevents further academisation. In this way, the professional identities of ECTs support the post-2010 biopolitical project to extend academisation throughout the school population.

Conclusion

The research reported on in this paper was a small-scale study; one of its most obvious limitations was that none of the schools involved had undergone 'forced academisation' – the process of being placed within a MAT following a poor Ofsted result. It is possible that, were sponsored academies to be included within the sample, the ECTs who participated in the research project may have demonstrated more resistance to academisation. Further research, involving ECTs across a greater variety of academy school types, is needed to better illuminate the multiple discursive positionings which ECTs can inhabit with regards to post-2010 academisation. Furthermore, the findings presented here may be unique to the primary sector. Residual stigma associated with the disciplinary function of academisation may be stronger in the secondary sector, where there is a longer history of academisation and the ratio of sponsored to converter academies is higher than that of the primary sector.⁷

ECTs have often, in previous research, been tacitly positioned as passive, used by school leaders to ensure compliance with academy objectives (Keddie 2019), to cut costs (Thompson, Lingard, and Ball 2020), and to make the school seem more attractive to local parents (Kulz

2017b). This paper has instead focused on ECTs' agency, exploring how ECTs discursively negotiate their first employment decisions as teachers. In doing so, this paper has taken a 'paranoid reading' of their discourse (Sedgwick 2003, 124) arguing that ECTs' resistance to be identified as academy teachers paradoxically facilitates the extension of academisation, indirectly supporting the post-2010 biopolitical effort by Conservative-led governments to convert every English school into an academy. But perhaps a more 'reparative reading' (150) is possible, one with a different affect. The ECTs who participated in this project were happy to work at academy schools, but – unlike the Charter School teachers in Weiner and Torres (2016) study, or Lefebvre and Thomas's Teach for America Corps (2017) – they were not opposed to working in maintained schools. This provides some hope that the academy project in England has not yet become hegemonic, and that another future – beyond the wholesale academisation imagined within Conservative policy documents – is possible.

Notes

1. Comprehensive schools are all-ability secondary schools run by local authorities.
2. A small number of pre-2010 academies (n = 25) had all-through status, merging primary and secondary phases within one school building.
3. There are four categories that Ofsted can place a school into following inspection: Outstanding, Good, Requires Improvement, and Inadequate.
4. There is no agreed definition of the length of this stage – indeed, the DfE's *Early Career Framework* (DfE, 2019) appears to limit the stage to only two years. However, as much media attention (Weale, 2018) and political discussion (HOCEC, 2017) focused on teacher attrition attends to decisions to leave teaching within five years of qualifying, I recruited teachers with five or fewer years of experience for the study reported in this paper.
5. Teach for America provided the inspiration for the Teach First programme in the UK, and offers a similar solution to intransigent educational issues by placing high-performing graduates in employment-based training within schools in 'low income schools' (Teach for America, 2020: n.p.).
6. Approval number HCA17180022(A)
7. There are 1656 converter academies in the secondary sector, 776 sponsored academies, and 229 free schools (DfE, 2021).
8. Newly Qualified Teacher (in the first year after qualification).
9. School Direct is an employment-based route into teaching, introduced in 2012.
10. Postgraduate Certificate of Education
11. Qualified Teacher Status

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ORCID

Kathryn Spicksley  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1101-3726>

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Appendix. Transcription symbols (derived from Jefferson 2004)

- ↑ Upward inflection
- ↓ Downward inflection
- (.) A brief interval within or between utterances (increased dots signify longer pause)
- and emphasised
- hh inbreath
- We:: Preceding sound lengthened (increased colons signify longer length)
- ° Quiet
- < Hurried start to speech
- [Overlapped speech

Note: [...] is not a transcription symbol but indicates that the conversation has been edited by the author for purposes of brevity.